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THE POET AUGUSTE ANGELLIER

BY ERNEST DIMNET

THE life story recently cut short of Auguste Angellier does not take long to tell. A son of humble parents, he begins life on a very small scale as an usher at the Lycée Louis le Grand, Paris. The *History of English Literature*, by Taine, gives him a mind to read Shakespeare in the text. He goes to England, where he pursues the same modest occupation, returns to France to serve in the war with Germany, passes the regular examinations, and becomes a professor of English first in one or two Parisian lycées, later at the Lille University, and in 1893 publishes two remarkable volumes on Robert Burns which place him at the head of European Anglicists. About that time he comes into a large fortune and without giving up his chair leads the life of a dilettante. He has always been passionately fond of art and large collections gradually crowd the three houses he possesses in Paris, Lille, and in his native town of Boulogne. He travels extensively and spends his winters in a sequestered Provençal nook. In 1896 he publishes his first volume of verse, *À l'Amie Perdue*, a love-story in two hundred sonnets which strikes a few experts as a rare achievement, but does not reach the general public and leaves the opinion-making critics in doubt. The author is a provincial professor only known by two huge volumes on some minor English poet; he is forty-seven years old and has never been seen in a fashionable literary circle; he does not belong to any school and is trumpeted by no coterie. So the most favorably impressed speak of him with the reticence of uncertainty and the half-suppressed smile of Parisian superiority. Five more volumes appear at various intervals, and cause the same astonishment without materially changing the universal indifference except in England, where the Clarendon Press publishes in 1908 a selection of his

poems. Even in 1909, when no less a critic than M. Faguet makes up his mind at last to devote to Angellier a long article in no less a periodical than the *Revue des Deux Mondes*—an unprecedented honor—the old smile and the slightly patronizing air are still visible, and the average reader is naturally more influenced by the reservations than by the praise. Yet the small band of real lovers of poetry have felt the strength and originality of the unknown professor, they realize that professor or not, provincial or not, he strikes them as few of even the greatest do. Year after year one meets more unprofessional amateurs who recite Angellier's verse as that of a classic, and that invisible wave of fame spreads so much that when the poet dies on February 28th of the present year—without a single paper having mentioned his illness—the whole press is full of affirmations of his genius, and one hears on all sides that if he had chosen to contest M. Henri de R  gnier's recent election to the Acad  mie Fran  aise his success would have been certain. Once more the melancholy truth that poets ought to die twice is verified. Everybody feels that Angellier is the poet of to-morrow, not of yesterday, and knows that he is one of whom France will always be proud.

The patronizing air which, as I said above, some Parisian critics thought it elegant to adopt when speaking of Angellier was fast making room for a respect not unmingled with awe when the poet died. His friends—at their head the well-known M. Ribot—had prevailed on him a few months before his illness to stand for the Acad  mie Fran  aise, and he had begun to call on a few members and on the chief writers who had noticed his poems. Many an infallible literary magnate must have felt an amused curiosity when the card of the poet was brought in and experienced a different and somewhat uncomfortable sensation when the visitor had been a few minutes in the room. Those who have not known Angellier personally will never realize his power completely, and of those who have known him personally none was ever heard to say that he had met with a more impressive individual. He looked tall, though he was not, so well poised was his fine dark head on athletic shoulders. Like Stevenson, he would pass in his way of dressing from bohemianism to refinement, but there was not in him the least trace either of rusticity or conventionality. His most sympathetic critic, Professor Legouis of the Sor-

bonne, says admirably that "*il se séparait du peuple moins par le raffinement que par l'intensité.*" In fact, he reminded one forcibly of his own description of Robert Burns in the fashionable Edinburgh society. Everything in him was remote from vulgarity, but he might have been one of those delightful artists who started life as artisans. Simplicity, however, is a word that would ill apply to him. His face generally wore a good-natured, whimsical smile which the least opportunity could change to a hearty laugh, but his deep-searching eye bespoke a reader of character, and it did not take much acquaintance with him to find out that he was easily moved to contempt if he discovered pretence or affectation.

His conversation was extraordinary. A year or two ago the present writer took Professor Bliss Perry to see him. Angellier had a vast knowledge of English literature and knew the English language to its subtlest niceties. But he had the French difficulty in speaking a foreign tongue, and it was a common joke among his pupils that when he went to London he asked the porter at Charing Cross if he could not speak French. Mr. Bliss Perry can bear testimony that, in spite of this disadvantage, his interlocutor struck him as one of the very few men who say constantly what they mean and all that they mean. He did not say clever things. In fact, though he was full of humor, he used to speak of wit as an inferior gift. His originality consisted less in novelty of point of view or expression, but rather in approaching ideas as a very intelligent child might, invariably by their most obvious aspect and never giving them up until he had scrutinized every dark corner of them. He was full of freshness and curiosity long after his hearers felt it would be useless for them to go further into the subject he handled. Truth, lucidity, and certitude were the objects of his impassioned search. He discussed in the same manner whatever seemed worth his while. Those who have heard him read Shakespeare will not easily forget how much he saw and made you see in an apparently puzzling metaphor.

His own speech was full of comparisons and metaphors which he evidently did not introduce as brilliant ornaments, but as they ought always to be, as illustrations. When one tried to remember what he had said those striking similes would rise by the dozen in the memory, but for the rest one preserved little more than a recollection of utterances arrest-

ing, though natural, and subtle, though perfectly clear. A few experiences convinced one that there was little chance of seeing anything in a question he had not seen and every likelihood of his pointing out important issues which one had left unnoticed. The effect was not always good. Some people would copy his metaphors instead of taking pattern by his intellectual honesty; others were paralyzed in his presence or even out of his presence by the haunting consciousness of their inferiority. Nobody who had met him once, no matter if he held the rod of the critic in the most formidable paper or magazine, felt tempted to think of him as the timid provincial professor and poet who needed protection. Readers of his introduction to the second volume of his work on Burns must have the same impression. When this book appeared in 1893, Taine was the unquestioned master of literary criticism, and his mechanical explanation of the works by their milieus was a dogma with ninety-nine in a hundred historians of literature. No grave nonsense about heredity and environment was heard as soon as this refutation of Taine's formulas and vindication of the complexity of nature became better known. Angellier's attitude was constantly respectful when he approached the opinions of the really great and good, but it implied no less constantly a firm resolution of coming at the truth and nothing daunted him.

His erudition was amazing. Apart from English literature, he was an authority on various departments of art criticism; had written a book on Henri Régnault and had materials for another on Holbein; he had a familiarity with the classics which his verses betray in every line; he had read the philosophers and had an illuminating way of summing up their doctrines in every-day words, and from an accidental dip into journalism when he was twenty seven or eight had preserved an interest in contemporary history.

A man with an encyclopædic learning, a passion for accuracy, and an obviously critical mind does not, as a rule, turn to poetry. When Angellier produced his first volume of verse at the ripe age of forty-seven there was considerable surprise even in his immediate circle. He had published in his early youth in obscure periodicals some fifty or sixty poems which nobody knew of and to which he never alluded and even his colleagues at the university were taken aback. He was a man of fine sensibilities, he loved nature,

and was a great haunter of beautiful or solitary places. He could be gentle to the utmost delicacy and his taste was for the refined and the noble in everything. In expression he was coarse and intense. Yet there was something in him which suggested the philosopher, and especially the ancient philosopher rather than the poet.

Our notion of the poet is deeply romantic and, in spite of the classical reaction, tends more and more to become identified with that of the artist, painter, or musician. When we hear the word poetry our mind ranges immediately between Shelley and Musset and frames an idea of an ultra-sensitive being given up to uncontrollable emotions, acting upon uncontrollable impulses, generally instinctive, and even feminine.

Angellier was totally irreducible to that notion. He had been violent and almost indomitable in boyhood and did not like things to run contrary to his wishes, but he was a man of almost unruffled serenity. He had a wonderful power of transmuting the rather second-rate fortitude of "it will be the same in a hundred years" into the pure gold of wisdom. He saw everything in the light of the eternal and universal. Even emotions—his own as well as those of others—he could treat as primarily accountable to reason. Nothing is more received as a poetical principle than that sentiment and even sensation are their own justification. The modern poet, whenever he feels moved, loses no time controlling his emotion, and our lyricism is largely made up of evanescent states of consciousness caught in elusive words. When the initial germs of such poems are examined they often resolve themselves into contradictions or delusions or so thin realities that they may be looked upon as non-existent. Angellier had that in common with all the classicists that he would not be duped by his own emotions any more than by current prejudices. He had suffered and he had enjoyed, but his sorrows and pleasures were as distinct and familiar to him as intellectual notions. One felt that he could and did discuss them inwardly so as to remove all danger of fallacy. Yet in spite of this intellectualism, he was spontaneous and almost child-like, and one felt that his sources of emotion were inexhaustible. He had in him all the contradictions of socratism; he had a sensual nature with a high and pure mind; he was a stoic with a streak of epicureanism too often visible in his smaller

songs; he was serious to sternness and often rabelaisian; harsh in his judgments even with his best friends and yet loving as a brother.

As he grew older he became less of a pure intellectualist without losing his serenity. The love drama recorded in *À l'Amie Perdue* made him realize the superiority of duty and sacrifice over mere passion and gave him the bravery worthy of Corneille—and recalling him much more than Vigny—which raises some of his poems to a height of nobleness. About the same time the Dreyfus affair, in which he distinguished at once the judicial case of an individual from the vast coalition of appetites and interests which used it for its own purposes, confirmed him in the principles of order which were natural to such a mind and gave a more practical touch to the speculative interest he had taken so far in politics. He was a patriot and began to fight the internal enemies of his country as he had fought the Germans thirty years before. Another change gradually took place in him. He had given up Christianity at the age of thirteen or fourteen on hearing “such arguments,” he used to say, “as one may hear in a roadside public house,” and since then had kept aloof from it, though he loved the “beautifully woven” lives of truly religious people. He was not troubled with metaphysical problems and placed—with curious insistence—his hopes of immortality in the survival of some of his poems. By degrees he lost this indifference; Christianity appeared to him, as to many other agnostics, at least a social necessity. This was raising the problem of morals and Angellier took the great step of viewing it from the side of the presence of goodness rather than of evil in the world. He became interested in the latest theological movements, and the present writer remembers the keen attention and the power of assimilation with which he followed an exposé of Father Tyrrell’s posthumous book on *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*. Some weeks before his death he asked for the rites of the Church with the simplicity and resoluteness which had marked all his life, but long before his illness he had begun to express even in his poems a faith in personal immortality. If he had lived a few years longer there is little doubt that his inspiration would have taken on a warmth and glow which stoicism can never know. As it is, Angellier remains one of the very few moderns who have thought and often felt as the ancients with a power

that can only belong to the rarest natures, and it is in this light that his works must be studied.

Such a man, living so independent and solitary a life, could not, needless to say, belong to a school. Angellier had read the poets—he bought every volume of verse that came in his way and used to say that he often found gems in the heaps of trash—but he imitated none. There is a likeness between him and Ovid, Ronsard, and Chénier—three whom he particularly appreciated, but the likeness was natural, not acquired.

He could hardly be, either, a pure lyricist of the Shelley type, and this is one of his limitations as well as one of his good points. His mind was always ready to rise to a height, but it was a lofty, not a soaring mind. In fact, he thought in verse exactly as in prose. He used to say that his writings in prose were so conscious and considered that he could tell the connection of his ideas before writing as if he had seen them already on paper, while his verse revealed itself to him much as a picture appears when the dust is gradually wiped away from it. But his casts of thought were the same whether he was conscious of them or not. In his poems, as in his conversation or in his meditations, he is a leisured contemplator and inquirer, a painter and an analyst, endowed with a gorgeous imagination and an extraordinary power of searching a thought to its inmost recesses. He is not unlike Balzac, whom I was more than once rather shocked to hear him place above Shakespeare. He has the same deliberate manner of approaching a subject and the same aversion to giving it up until he has scanned its every aspect. He is a great describer. Whether the subject of his description is the soul or inanimate nature or both at the same time, he sees everything and makes you see it. The most striking instance will be furnished by a poem in a volume which he had quite ready for publication and entirely printed long before his death, but which his indifference to public suffrage had made him keep in his desk for nearly two years. This poem—a piece of five or six hundred lines—is entitled the *Opale*, and is the minutest, the most patient, and the most graphic description not only of the evanescent reflections in the stone, but of the ever-disappointed and ever-renewed efforts of a man to discover the mysterious center of the opal, what the poet calls its secret. The psychological analysis of the man is as human in its untiring perseverance

as the description of the stone is pictorial. This poem is a "*tour de force*," and though it symbolizes the author's peculiar tone of mind it does not represent it. Angellier seldom seeks difficulties. On the contrary, he has the true poetic liking for the old inexhaustible commonplaces. Take his volumes one after the other, their themes are as elementary as can be. *À l'Amie Perdue* is the lament of a man who had never known what true love meant and loses his inspiration; *Le Chemin des Saisons* consists entirely of descriptions and love songs; the two volumes of Dialogues in the series entitled *Dans la Lumière Antique* are devoted to the simplest subjects: love, art, the essential sadness of life, war, patriotism; the two volumes of *Episodes* in the same series offer every-day scenes of ancient life and are crowned by a masterpiece, the semi-elegiac, semi-dramatic theme of a mother who has lost her child. But there is not a single hackneyed thought or phrase in those thousands of lines, and they are full of numberless notations about man and nature of which few others would think and which widen the reader's vision as a fairy guide to the world.

This deep and original re-reading of the universe would at first sight give Angellier some relationship with the English metaphysical poets whom he knew well and enjoyed following through their meanders, but his sensuousness places him entirely apart from them. His poems are as full of imagery as his conversation was rich in metaphors. He hardly ever conceived an idea without perceiving the graceful garment becoming it, as every beautiful scene or object in nature struck him at once as a symbol. I wish I could have space enough to quote two poems in *Le Chemin des Saisons*, one entitled *L'Habitude*—in my opinion immeasurably superior to the poem of Sully-Prud'homme on the same subject—in which every line describes the effects of habit in soft, soothing metaphors; and another—*Les Chrysanthèmes*—describing an autumn garden in terms suitable to a lonely life. His wealth and at the same time rarity of illustration recall Keats, another of his favorites about whom he wrote a remarkable book, the only fault of which is that it is in Latin. Discursive as he is, he is never rhetorical, thanks to the beauty of his images and his constant recurrence to human feelings. A strong instinct brought him back incessantly to the truly vital. His poems on love, on patriotism, and on war are in dialogues, and his last book, *Dans la Lumière*

Antique, Episodes, as well as the yet unpublished volume, are eminently dramatic.

The philosophy underlying Angellier's poems is naturally that of the man who seemed to have taken as his motto the "*Nil humanum a me alienum.*" Its aspects are various and not uniformly pleasant. The two poles of his nature were evidently the indulgence of the epicurean and the somber courage of the stoic, and he passes from one to the other with disconcerting rapidity, but the stoic in him constantly gets the better of the epicurean. His healthy, unconscious sensuality disports itself in hundreds of songs, but it is the play of one summer hour. Angellier had the deepest contempt for those strange products of civilization to whom sexualism is a haunting consciousness: only he thought life too short and miserable to discard any pleasure it might offer. These songs often border on the most delicate sentiment. Nobody has found so much to see and love in the blue of a woman's eyes. Five or six of the sonnets in *À l'Amie Perdue*—the one beginning

"Les caresses des yeux sont les plus adorables,
Elles apportent l'âme aux limites de l'être"

is a wonder of subtle thought and subdued music—and many scattered passages in the longer poems had not exhausted his treasure of perceptions in this respect. Love, pure, mysterious, and inexplicable love is not far from this enjoyment of the spiritual charm of beauty. Angellier has often attained it. It fills the sequence *À l'Amie Perdue*, and its power is so great that it has changed the poet's stern bravery into resignation. It is probable that Angellier owed the seed of his tardy religious evolution to the woman who taught him the beauty of sacrifice.

This seed was years in maturing, and one may say that during the greatest part of his life Angellier was thrown back on the bitter cup of pagan philosophy. Sadness prevails in his works. He has called or dared death in several of his best short poems, and a long dialogue, in which one of the participants is a girl who might be a Greek sister of Schopenhauer, is a plea for annihilation. His most perfect myth—there are several in his works—is that entitled the "Sadness of Dawn." Dawn is not, as the Greeks thought, the joyous Eos. She is a melancholy deity who hesitates long each morning before unveiling the luminous globe she holds under her purple robes, and who, when at

last she resolves to raise it above the universal misery, sheds such bitter tears that the whole world is made wet with them.

Pessimism certainly gave its color to Angellier's philosophy: love was uncertain and incomplete, life was full of sufferings—one's own and those of others; death, which he seems in one place to advise as the remedy, was, after all, only the final destruction; genius, beauty, virtue, happiness, all were doomed to perish in the universal shipwreck. From those somber ideas he found a relief in the endless contemplation of Nature which occupies probably two-thirds of his works, and, as I said above, in the last period of his life he sought a refuge against them in the energy of his patriotism and in the dawning certitude that courage and goodness must have their counterpart in some less wretched existence than the present one. But this is not enough to suggest hope and cheerfulness where so much is said about failure and mere dogged courage.

As an artist Angellier is not perfect. He has the faults of his qualities: he is too powerful and too sustained. His flights suggest not the prophetic lark, but the strong-winged hoverers who are more attentive to the earth than to the sky. One feels he could place himself in the poetic state almost at will, but never in this state as Socrates describes it. He is a philosopher gifted with an incomparable imagination, but he is no lyricist. The consequence is that he sees too much and occasionally says too much. He never drops a theme or an image until he has exhausted it. Sometimes his imagery is so rich that it bewilders. Often his period would be perfect if he did not perversely add a line which may be full of meaning, but impairs its balance. He wrote a little too much to please himself.

But all told he is as great a poet as he was a rare man. The only living French poet who does not shrink almost ridiculously when placed beside him is Richepin, whom he exceeds by all the loftiness of his thought. Nay, you can compare him not only to Sully-Prud'homme or Laprade or even Vigny, but to the very greatest—Hugo, Lamartine, Musset. He has not their inspiration, but his inspiration can be named along with theirs, and as an artist he has none of their defects. One may defy the subtlest critic to find a single line in all his works that was written because one line more was wanted. He may be the only modern French poet who gives his reader a sense of absolute security and repose.

He has nothing to fear from the future. The qualities of fancifulness and airy musicalness which we somewhat desiderate in him are those which have been aped rather than attained in the productions of the last century and with the feeble imitations of which the public taste has been surfeited, while Angellier's classical soundness is the ideal toward which the best artists and the best judges are the most powerfully drawn. He had felt it himself, and the following are not the only verses in which he said it with the quick confidence we loved so much in him:

“ Je ne partirai pas sans laisser quelques gerbes;
 Et lorsque l'avenir vannera mes épis,
 Peut-être mettra-t-il près de chants plus superbes
 Mon hommage modique aux vieux murs assoupis.”

ERNEST DIMNET.